

A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor in Engineering Sciences

LCA of building materials that include a biobased binder: lessons and challenges

Saïcha Gerbinet

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Supervisor: Prof. Angélique Léonard

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ABSTRACT

There is growing concern over the sustainability of our lifestyles that are fueling initiatives for eco-design, or finding ways to reduce our environmental footprint at every level (individual, industrial, state). One of the sectors with the largest environmental impact is construction, and manufacturers are looking into substituting certain fossil-based, toxic, and polluting elements with biobased ones. An example of this is the development from Knauf Insulation of a new binder named ECOSE[®], based on sugar extracted from wheat or corn, to replace the traditional formaldehyde-based one. Binder is used in numerous construction products, namely insulating wool such a glass mineral wool or wood panels. These concerns require a complete evaluation of the environmental impact of these building materials that include a biobased binder.

The most rigorous method to date to exhaustively evaluate the environmental impact of a product (or a service, system, process, etc.) is Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). The idea is to inventory everything that goes into making the product and everything that is generated, including waste, emissions, and byproducts, and measure their impact in all pertinent categories, not only green-house gas emissions but also land occupation, air, water, and soil pollution, resource depletion, toxicity, and more. Using a biobased binder might reduce toxicity and fossil fuel depletion, but will it improve overall the environmental impact of the product ?

To answer this question, this PhD thesis looks at the life cycle of ECOSE[®] and its use in insulating wool produced by Knauf Insulation, and compares them to those made with a conventional binder. The ECOSE[®] binder, when applied in glass mineral wool allows to reduce the environmental impact in climate change and fossil fuel consumption, but this is not the case in other categories such as acidification and eutrophication. For some categories, no clear conclusion can be draws due to uncertainties. Nevertheless, as this study does not include the use phase, the benefit on indoor air quality of reducing formaldehyde emissions are not included.

In this work, we also show the challenges of responding to these environmental concerns, in terms of measuring the impact and how to translate the results into clear-cut answers. We have found and described the many sources of variation in the measurements, from the uncertainties in the data to the differences in implementation of the LCA methodology in software. The difficulties to have accurate method to evaluate the impact, in some categories such as toxicity is also underlined, such as the difficulties related to background data and database and the need of local data, especially for biobased product. We then explained the difficulty in deriving impactful decisions from the interpretation of the results, as there is never a perfect solution. As the methods and the data improve and LCA becomes more widespread, the hope is that for things such as biobased materials, we will make the right choice, and thus leave a healthy planet.

RÉSUMÉ

Les préoccupations grandissantes concernant la durabilité de notre mode de vie ont mené au développement d'initiatives d'éco-design ou visant à réduire notre impact sur l'environnement et ce à tous les niveaux (individuel, industriel, national). Le secteur du bâtiment a un impact environnemental non négligeable et les producteurs essaient de remplacer certains constituants toxiques et issus de ressources fossiles par des constituants bio-basés. C'est par exemple le cas de Knauf Insulation qui a développé un nouveau liant bio-basé appelé ECOSE® pour remplacer le liant conventionnement utilisé à base de phénol-formaldéhyde. Ce nouveau liant est produit à partir de sucre venant de céréales (blés ou maïs). Les liants ont de nombreuses applications dans les produits de la construction, comme les produits isolants comprenant notamment la laine de verre ou les panneaux en bois. Ces préoccupations requièrent une analyse environnementale complète de ces matériaux de construction, y compris du liant bio-basé.

La méthode la plus rigoureuse disponible actuellement pour évaluer l'impact environnemental d'un produit (ou d'un service) est l'analyse du cycle de vie (ACV). L'idée est d'inventorier toutes les entrées nécessaires à la production du produit étudié mais également tout ce qui est généré, en incluant les déchets, les émissions et les éventuels coproduits et de mesurer leurs impacts dans toutes les catégories pertinentes, pas seulement le réchauffement climatique mais aussi l'occupation des sols, la pollution de l'air, de l'eau ou du sol, la diminution des ressources, la toxicité, etc. L'utilisation d'un liant bio-basé va probablement diminuer la toxicité du produit et la consommation de ressources fossiles mais est-ce que cela va aussi réduire les autres impacts sur l'environnement?

Pour répondre à cette question, le cycle de vie du liant ECOSE® produit par Knauf Insulation et son utilisation dans un isolant ont été étudiés et comparés avec le liant conventionnel. Le liant ECOSE®, quand il est utilisé dans de la laine de verre, permet de réduire le réchauffement climatique et la consommation de ressources fossiles mais ce n'est pas le cas dans d'autres catégories telles que l'acidification et l'eutrophisation. Pour certaines catégories, il n'est pas possible de conclure à cause des incertitudes trop élevées. Néanmoins, comme cette étude ne prend pas en compte la phase d'utilisation, les bénéfices sur la qualité de l'air de la réduction des émissions de formaldéhyde ne sont pas inclus.

Dans ce travail, nous avons aussi mis en évidence les challenges à relever pour répondre à ces préoccupations environnementales, en terme de mesure de l'impact et de comment traduire les résultats en réponses claires. Nous avons identifié et décrit plusieurs sources de variations dans les mesures, des incertitudes dans les données en passant par les différences d'implémentation des méthodes d'évaluation d'impact dans les logiciels d'ACV. Les difficultés d'avoir des méthodes précises d'évaluation de l'impact dans certaines catégories comme la toxicité ont aussi été soulignées comme les difficultés liées aux données d'arrière-plan et aux bases de données et la nécessité d'utiliser des données locales dans le cas de matériaux bio-basés. Nous avons aussi expliqué les difficultés à trouver des solutions pertinentes en interprétant les résultats. En effet, il n'y a jamais de solution parfaite. Comme les méthodes et les données disponibles pour faire des ACV deviennent de plus en plus nombreuses, l'espoir est que nous puissions faire les bons choix sur des sujets tels que les matériaux bio-sourcés et ainsi préserver notre planète.

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